



# FAMILY FORWARD OREGON

Smart policies for today's families.

April 3, 2017

Testimony in Support of SB 241 and SB 242: Maintaining Family  
Relationships During Parental Incarceration  
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Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 241 and SB 242, which will help maintain family relationships during a parent's incarceration. **Family Forward believes that if we want to break the cycle of poverty and incarceration in Oregon we must look for ways to better support children with parents in the criminal justice system.** Promoting strong familial ties, both in prison and after release, reduces recidivism and increases parental involvement and helps children of incarcerated parents succeed.

Family Forward is an organization committed to advancing policies that support families and help them succeed, both in the workplace and at home. Our mission is to create a family-forward Oregon where all families can be economically secure and have the time it takes for family responsibilities. Family Forward supports policies, like maintaining familial relationships and providing parental support during incarceration, that promote strong families and make economic stability more achievable.

The nation's growing prison and jail population has raised serious questions about the collateral effects of incarceration on children, families and communities. **Whatever one's views about the appropriate role of incarceration in the criminal justice system, it is clear that imprisonment disrupts positive, nurturing relationships between many parents—particularly mothers—and their children.** In addition, many families with children suffer economic strain and instability when a parent is imprisoned. Supporting strong familial ties while incarcerated preserves and strengthens positive family connections; it also yields many positive benefits in the form of reduced recidivism, less intergenerational criminal justice system involvement, and promotes healthy child development.

In an era of mass incarceration, where the United States makes up 5 percent of the world's population but has 25 percent of the world's prison population, we must make changes to how we shape public policy. **The status quo is clearly not working.**

We know that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to drop out of school, engage in delinquency, and subsequently be incarcerated themselves. We also know that parental involvement is critical to a child's success. Yet we provide minimal support to incarcerated parents to help them maintain regular, meaningful contact with their children while incarcerated.

Children of incarcerated parents live in a variety of circumstances. Some were previously in homes of two-parent families, where the non-incarcerated parent can assume primary

responsibility for the children. Many children, especially in cases of women's incarceration, were in single-parent homes and are then cared for by a grandparent or other relative, or in foster care. The large-scale women's imprisonment in our state and across the country has resulted in an increasing number of children who experience economic insecurity. Mothers are now the primary or sole breadwinners in nearly 40 percent of families nationwide. As we continue to imprison increasing numbers of women and mothers, this has grave effects for the families who depend on them.

**Maintaining strong relationships between parents and their children during incarceration is a critical part of ensuring these families succeed post-release - and that children are able to stay with their parents and out of foster care.**

Continuing funding of the Family Preservation project as proposed in SB 242 is a cost-effective and proven mechanism to ensure incarcerated mothers are able maintain relationships with their children during incarceration. This program has been able to dramatically reduce recidivism in this population, supports the successful re-entry and reduces the trauma experienced by their children during a parent's incarceration. SB 241 focuses on the rights of children of incarcerated parents by ensuring every child whose parent is arrested and/or incarcerated has certain fundamental rights, including the right to be protected from additional trauma when a parent is arrested, to be informed of the arrest in an age-appropriate manner, to see, speak with and touch the incarcerated parent and to be heard and respected by decision makers when decisions are made about the child. The Governor's Re-Entry Council will then work to develop and implement funding recommendations that ensure criminal justice policy and practice take children's rights into account when a parent is incarcerated.

Programs that support children of incarcerated parents and facilitate contact and interaction between the parent and their children, as envisioned in SB 241 and SB 242, will help keep familial bonds strong. It will also reduce the collateral damage of parental incarceration on children, families and the community and help break the cycle of intergenerational involvement in the criminal justice system, poverty and addiction. We urge your support of these two important pieces of legislation.